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ABSTRACT

The author presents a survey of public opinion against continued innovation in the field of education, drawn from editorials and reportage in "Newsweek," "The New York Times," "The Tampa Tribune-Times," and "U.S. News and World Report." Contrast is made to continued calls by educators in professional books and journals for continued innovation in all areas of education. The assertions are made that (1) Reasonable and moderate innovation in the curriculum can be useful, but such innovation should not be allowed to reduce academic standards and interfere with the correct evaluation of student performance; and (2) a proper mix of traditional education along with limited and proven innovative concepts should yield far better results than much of the change that has been employed in recent years under the label of innovation. (Author/MJB)

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THE CURRICULUM: THE PUBLIC MEDIA VERSUS THE PROFESSIONAL BOOKS AND JOURNALS

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THE CURRICULUM: THE PUBLIC MEDIA VERSUS THE PROFESSIONAL BOOKS AND JOURNALS

Monumental debates in the public media concerning teaching methods and the curricula have been very much in evidence during the past several years. Generally speaking, education books and journals have continued to support still more innovation - individualized instruction, open classrooms, emphasis on peer relationship and non-punitive grading systems and the like. On the other hand, many of the nation's newspapers, newsmagazines, television programs and the public itself appear to have become somewhat disenchanted with the results of the educational establishment's great emphasis on affective rather than cognitive learning that has been ubiquitous in pre and even in much post secondary school education during the past decade and a half.

Frequently reports come to light that hundreds of thousands of graduating high school seniors can perform at only fourth, fifth or sixth grade reading and writing levels; that sizable numbers are functionally illiterate. The highly publicized case of the valedictorian of a large public high school in Washington, D.C. who after several attempts at taking the College Entrance Examination Boards could still score only at a sixth grade level of achievement is too well known to need documentation. This is only one of scores of similarly un-

believable occurrences; such instances were virtually unknown a generation ago. Since declining academic achievement levels have been reported by most of the nation's prestigious testing services for the same period of years during which the most radically innovative teaching methods and non-punitive grading practices were being employed, it is understandable that critics in the public media, as well as much of the public itself, are concerned. ~~While~~ Radically innovative teaching techniques should by no means take all of the blame for deteriorating achievement levels; (a permissive society, excessive use of television in the home, the economic recession with consequent reduced funding for education, increased discipline problems and other factors all contribute to the problem). Yet there is substantial reason to support the argument that radically innovative teaching methods, including the overuse of objective testing formats in the classroom along with insufficient employment of written tests, bears much of the blame.

Many people maintain that the integration of the races in the public schools and colleges has been a factor in reducing achievement levels and in bringing academic grade inflation. This may play some part but perhaps not a major one. Black leaders such as the eminent psychologist Kenneth Clark and the Reverend Jessie Jackson have both been sharply critical of permissive teaching methods and their so-called "caring" educational philosophies. Says Clark:

> Without apology I would say that I am a traditionalist...Any theory that a student shouldn't be pressured, that he shouldn't be frustrated, imposes on the child the most horrible form of self-deception.[1]

He argues that a major problem in the public schools, and even in some colleges, is that influential educational theorists and administrators have introduced too many periferal school activities, too many affective educational teaching methods and non-punitive testing formats to take the place of substantive learning. The Reverand Jessie Jackson substantiates this position by saying:

> My organization, Operation PUSH, arranged for the testing of one Chicago high school sophomore to see what he knows compared to others around the country. We found that he was reading below the third grade level. Among other things, he thinks that George Washington discovered America. His mother was alarmed, school officials were embarrassed,but no one could be held accountable.[2]

Jackson maintains that many people like this are falsely certified, that they are functionally illiterate and that they are being passed off as functionally literate.[3] Blacks such as Clark and Jackson are not demanding special treatment and "understanding" in the classroom for minority students, although it may be true that some minority leaders and school administrators make such demands. Instead, the former are insisting on more vigorous standards for blacks as well as for whites. While a slight accommodation may on occasion be in order for minority students, far too many "understanding" educationists,

administrators and teachers have allowed radically permissive standards to accommodate the so-called disadvantaged and under-prepared students of all races.

Newsweek reports in "Basic is Better" that the back to basics movement has provided better results than most of the innovative teaching formats of recent years. A 3 million dollar study, sponsored by the United States Office of Information, shows that children from low-income families did far better than those in more "creative" programs. The former, unlike the latter, emphasized structure, basic skills, especially writing, and cognitive rather than affective learning. This major study focused on the achievement levels of 9,200 third graders in special programs for the disadvantaged. This basic "Distar" system requires that the children follow a substantially traditional learning approach; the results were most impressive. By comparison, children in open classroom projects ranked in the bottom third of all U.S. students. the two groups studied were from similarly poor socio-economic backgrounds.[4]

The New York Times likewise reports disenchantment with many innovative teaching techniques such as the use of open classrooms, independent study, the extreme use of the elective system, non-punitive grading, and, also, demands more basic curricula and instructional formats. Such innovations are blamed, to a large extent, for the movement away from reading the works of authors such as Dickens and Hawthorne and for their

replacement with "relevant" literature, ranging from mystery fiction to comic books. As a result of declining achievement scores during the past dozen years, pressure from parents, politicians and the public itself has helped in recent months to produce signs of a more moderate and, in some cases, even a more traditional approach in some pre and post secondary institutions.

The New York Times reports that in recent months some public schools have found that many innovative teaching methods which had promised so much simply were not working at all. For example, team teaching did not seem to work because it was impossible for the teachers to get to know all of the students under this format. While the students enjoyed the idea of independent study, they turned out to need more formal guidance than they could get in the 10 or 15 minutes each day alone with the teacher.[5] Says the Times:

> Within two years, reading scores in the district had begun to fall and in 1973 the Merrick schools declared a pause in efforts to innovate.[6]

It was finally decided that in order to make progress, it was important to interact not only with peers but also with the teacher.

The above study appears to indicate that innovation in instruction should be gradual, limited and carefully examined before it should be considered worthy of employment on a large scale. It may be reasonable to assume that the most effective

types of teaching should include so-called basic education along with limited modification in certain situations if mature judgment so warrants. Even if the latter method were not effective, all would not be lost, as is so often the situation with many radically innovative efforts, since fundamental education (including writing skills) would still have to be studied. If the use of exclusively objective testing in the classroom were all that was needed for effective education, teaching would be a simple process indeed. As with most areas of human endeavor, much of what at first appears obvious is not always simplistic. Even though science, the social sciences, art and literature evolve to a substantial degree as the decades and generations pass, a good scientist, for example, must still have basic scientific and mathematical knowledge; a good social scientist still needs traditional writing, reading and research skills; and a good artist still must have solid knowledge and skills in drawing, painting, art history and the like. What many of the radically innovative teaching formats have done in recent years has been to discard the fundamentals and eternal verities for so-called "relevance" and presentism; the foundation and structure have too often been omitted. Fads of the day cannot replace subject matter, fundamental skills and substantive learning; affective learning does not replace cognitive information. Myriad studies agree that many grades of "B" today represent, approximately, the academic achievement levels of a grade "C"

a generation ago. The non-punitive concept of many educational innovators has had much to do with this development. But this has cheapened the currency of the academic diploma. Employers in recent years have understandably been unimpressed with the achievement levels of their recent employees, especially when many substantiate this impression by displaying low academic skills and abilities on the job.

The Office of Institutional Research at the University of California at Berkeley has recently reported that the number of A's awarded by 23 selected colleges and universities more than doubled from 1963 to 1974, from 16 percent to 34 percent. The number of C's declined from 37 percent to 21 percent. The typical grade point average at Berkeley increased from 2.54 (out of a possible 4.0) in 1965 to 3.09 this year.[7] In order to rectify this situation to some degree, Berkeley is attempting to implement a "relative" transcript, which would indicate how the grades of other students in particular classes compare with those of individual students in the same classes.[8]

The Tampa Tribune-Times reports that Drs. Roy Francis and James Hansen of the Sociology Department of the University of South Florida in Tampa blame much of academic grade inflation on what they call "student power", which they claim is directly linked to the decline in academic standards. They are especially concerned with an "enrollment economy" and with an increased use of teacher evaluations by students which they

maintain contribute to the decline. Say Dr. Francis and Hansen:

> What that decline means is that a B.A. degree, particularly in the liberal arts, currently certifies little more than that their recipients have warmed the seats of a college for four- possibly even three or less years.
>
> With financial support determined by numbers of bodies turned out (with little or no weight given to the quality of the product) and student attendance now voluntary or easily terminated, this "enrollment economy" forces colleges to become more sensitive to the likes and dislikes of students.[9]

Francis and Hansen point out that four studies of student evaluations duirng the past 15 years have indicated that feedback from evaluation forms tends to produce higher ratings in the future. These were associated with decreases in course requirements and other efforts to increase their "rapport" with students. Thus, they maintain, "student evaluations may be a contributing factor in the process of destandardization."[10]

From the above it appears that some innovations, including student evaluations of their instructors, do contribute to lowered academic standards rather than to better learning. While the moderate use of audio-visual materials and some independent study can be of benefit, there is nothing wrong with the more traditional lecture-discussion method of teaching if done properly. Average and even less than average students can benefit substantially by well organized and moderately paced lecture material (often more so than by "accommodating"

them with unstructured "caring" approaches - such as relating them to their peers, the use of sociograms and of role playing). To maintain that the lecture method does not belong to the twentieth century because of the development of teaching machines, computer instructional materials and audio-visual materials is not a valid assumption. Indeed, it has been during the very period when this "software" and "hardware" has been most often employed that we have found the most serious decline in academic achievement. While it may not follow that these mechanical devices have actually caused this decline, it can be maintained that they have not improved academic achievement levels - as their supporters had so confidently predicted. Nor have "caring and sharing" and "peer relating" classes proven to be the answer either. Of course instructors should be understanding, sympathetic and even "humanistic" in their relationships with their students. At the same time, however, they should at least try to uphold some semblance of academic standards, a phrase which too often has been considered a forbidden expression in recent years.

A chapter written by K. Patricia Cross, the well-known supporter of highly innovative instructional formats, "New Forms For New Functions" questions the traditional concept of academic standards in higher education.[11] She maintains that "the task of conveying information in the academic disciplines is becoming untenable as a teaching function because of the

"knowledge explosion." Yet even though she believes this may be true, it should not cause the discard of higher education's long standing aim of teaching students a certain body of knowledge, along with skills, attitudes and interests. The argument that it is not necessary to learn information because "you can always look it up" is an invalid today as it ever was.

Another Cross argument, which may have some validity, is that the academic disciplines form too narrow a base upon which to build a society. She argues that academic success is not highly related to success in life outside academe, and claims that "we have overemphasized the importance of that narrow range of human abilities that enable people to perform tasks in the school system."[12] While Cross may be correct in stating that higher education does not involve itself with all or even most of the human skills and abilities, it is perhaps unfair to criticize institutions of higher education for this failure. While the nation and the world need many of these human skills and abilities, it is doubtful that most of them can best be developed in colleges and universities. It is possible that America, in its effort to make higher education available to everyone, is trying to force it on those who would be better served in apprenticeship or in other types of programs.

Patricia Cross points out that "new students" (those in the lowest third academically) must be "redesigned for the egalitarian era."[13] She claims that new students prefer a

vocational model that will teach them what they need to know to make a good living. She maintains that as much money should be spent on new students in community colleges as on more traditional students in universities. Thus, she says, "different would be equated with most and not least." Cross argues that only by allowing people to succeed in different ways will egalitarian education succeed. Yet while Cross's arguments may have merit in some degree, they can also have a deliterious effect on what has usually been recognized as quality education. Few people would deny so-called new students the right to a good postsecondary education; yet in practice her plan might not work out as she envisions. If many new students show little interest in academic education, which she admits, these people should not be badgered and enticed into following such programs as they so often are today. Simply to graduate poorly prepared students and thus putting credentials into their hands, which they really have not earned, as so often is the case today, exacerbates the problem instead of alleviating it. Cross, like many other radical innovators, appears little concerned with this situation; she appears to be more interested in a student's image of success rather than in his true academic achievement.

Recognizing that there are greater differences among student abilities today than in earlier years because more people are attending college than ever before, the concept of individualized instruction at first glance appears to be a

good one. Indeed, under some circumstances this may very well add to the learning opportunities of highly diverse student bodies. Some approaches to individualized instruction, according to Cross, have included multiple tracking and ability grouping; interdisciplinary and student designed majors; programmed instruction and learning contracts; and alternate paths to meeting a specific degree or competency requirements of individualized instruction. Others include independent study and learning contracts, and directed reading and individual or autotutorial techniques, including programmed instruction.[14] While these formats may be useful in limited and special circumstances, they have in many instances been used far too frequently. Thus many students who have not even learned the rudiments of a subject are put on their own in various forms of independent study programs where they flounder in a sea of confusion. So-called "papers" are substituted for examinations; often subject matter goes unlearned and no one seems concerned.

Learning contracts are written agreements or committments between a student and a faculty member regarding a particular amount of student work to be accomplished, and the institutional reward or credit for his work.[15] While the proponents of learning contracts praise them for getting students involved in their individual learning program, they have several weaknesses. Some students become quite anxious and feel under pressure. They seek relief through performance in a competitive manner.[16]

Also, contract learning has not brought the educational "drama" that some had predicted. Further, it demands strong motivation by students, which is too often lacking. While contracts allow for increased creativity, they neither insure nor create it. Further, the individual curricular approach may cost much more than traditional curricula , a real problem in today's educational funding situation.

While there may be a need for new teaching methods to accommodate new and non-traditional students, the question of how properly to account for reasonable academic standards under many new curricula and teaching methods remains difficult to resolve. Writers such as John Rouche and Terry O'Banion apparently are not very concerned with academic standards and accountability as these terms have traditionally been understood. Indeed, O'Banion claims that the curriculum of non-traditional students should be built around the areas in which such students have already known aptitude. He would do away with the use of diagnostic tests, since they indicate to students their weaknesses (a negative factor) as well as their strengths.[17]

John Rouche claims that grading policies and practices should be non-punitive in order that such students can gain a feeling of success which they may previously have lacked. Rather than lowering standards,[18] says Rouche, this plan would give students as much time as necessary to learn a body of

knowledge.[19] This format is supported by a group of educators of the "PSI" or Personalized System of Instruction camp. Whether students who master a body of knowledge after a year's study should receive the same grades as those who complete it in one semester is a highly controversial issue. Undoubtedly many employers would prefer to hire the latter rather than the former.

Some of the above suggestions by O'Banion and Rouche may be commendable to a degree. It is conceivable that these ideas might be useful for some unmotivated and underprepared students. On the other hand, recent studies point out that many of these innovative ideas, which take competition out of learning and achievement, and which sometimes stress innovation and accommodation at the expense of substantive information, have not brought the happy results which their optimistic advocates expected.

Still other innovations which promised so much, as they have been described in education journals, no longer look so promising, according to Dr. Fred T. Wilhelms, Executive Secretary of the National Association for Secondary Principals. He decries the general failure of the concept of "team teaching," once acclaimed as the acme of modern educational methodology.[20] Gross places some of the blame for declining academic standards on America's too optimistic reliance on "systems", especially in areas where method may be less important than a dedicated instructor.[21]

U.S. News and World Report reports that basic teaching must be reinstated into the educational system. It points out that many educational innovations of the past 20 years - including team teaching, open classrooms and "individualized instruction" - aren't working as well as more basic methods (as reported by two federally financed studies of 40,000 students over three years.[22] Says U.S. News:

> One study by Abt Associates of Cambridge, Mass., found that highly structured programs that emphasized basic skills have been much more successful than open classrooms, particularly in raising the achievement of low-income children.
>
> What's more, those children in traditional classrooms apparently acquire great self esteem than do youngsters taught in other ways.
>
> ...students enrolled in programs with a more moderate emphasis on innovation and individualization showed the greatest improvement on reading and mathematics skills...[23]

The above remarks, substantiated by detailod experimentation and research involving almost 40,000 students, the major issues of this paper - indicate that there should be a greater emphasis on basic skills and information presented in a structured fashion; and that there should be a major reduction in innovative teaching programs. Let it be hoped that educators and others in positions of decision making take notice. These results simply prove further (if even more data were necessary) that the pleadings of the public media and the vast majority of the people who are concerned should be heard. The time for such hearing is long overdue. Change may be in order, but not

the kind of change which the radical innovators have been implementing since the early 1960's. This is a call for moderation and reason, not for reaction. The above criticisms are not an indictment of some successful experiments which are now being developed in the schools and colleges. Cooperative and work-study programs, while not exactly new, are widely accepted as useful experiences in career education. But their spread is blocked by child labor laws, scarcity of jobs and union contracts. Schools and colleges can do a better job in preparing young people for jobs that are actually available by giving them more realistic guidance. Community colleges in particular have been offering workers a change in mid-career so that they are not condemned for life to a bad job.

In conclusion, moderate and carefully considered innovative practices, combined with a generous amount of proven traditional and basic methods, may be the best answer for education. Curricula and instruction undoubtedly will be somewhat different a decade hence. But let us not assume that they will be so changed as to be nearly unrecognizable - as some writers would lead us to believe. In fact, there has developed in recent months a decided trend toward "back to the basics." Today, many innovative teaching techniques which were thought to be a panacea for the classroom only a few years ago are being seriously questioned and even discarded. In many areas of the nation the popularity of the permissive and open school is

already slowing down for a more traditional methodology. Says Newsweek:

> At the open-education school (in Pasadena, California) the enrollment is 550 and the waiting list is 515. At the John Marshall Fundamental School, however, a total of 1,700 students are enrolled and the waiting list has passed the 1,000 mark.[24]

Newsweek reports similar public school enrollments in many areas of the country today. On balance, the growing call for a return to the basics seems to be a healthy indication that many Americans have been questioning educational nostrums given them by well-meaning but misdirected innovators.[25] If the printed book is still the major teaching tool, as many still believe, perhaps educational change will be steady but more moderate than some people suspect.

List of Footnotes

[1]"Back to the Basics in the Schools," Newsweek, October 21, 1974, p. 91.

[2]Jessie L. Jackson, "Nation Must Demand Excellence in Schools," Miami Herald, April 21, 1977, p. 10.

[3]Ibid.

[4]Ibid.

[5]"Suburban Schools and Developing Curriculums That Discard Many Innovations That Marked the 1960's," New York Times, June 15, 1977, p. 65.

[6]Ibid.

[7]"Colleges Try To Halt Meaningless Grades," Miami Herald, May 3, 1977, p. 7.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Ibid.

[10]Ibid.

[11]K. Patricia Cross, "New Forms For New Techniques," Lifelong Learners, A New Clientele for Higher Education, Dyckman W. Vermile (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass), 1974, pp. 87-88.

[12]Ibid.

[13]Ibid.

[14]K. Patricia Cross, "The New Learners," On Learning and Change (new Rochelle: Change Magazine, 1973), p. 74.

[15]Neal R. Berte, "Individualization and Contracting," Individualizing Education by Learning Contracts, New Directors for Higher Education, No. 10, Summer, 1975, p.3.

[16]Ibid, p. VII

[17]Terry O'Banion, "Humanizing Education in the Community College" (a paper presented at the Second Annual Summer Institute Ed.D. Program for Community College Faculty at Nova University, Hollywood, Florida, July, 1974.)

List of Footnotes Continued

[18]John Rouche and R. Wade Kirk, Catching Up: Remedial Education: Jossey Bass Publishers, 1973, p. 85.

[19]Ibid. pp. 85-86.

[20]"Back to the Basics in the Schools," Newsweek, October 21, 1974, p. 91.

[21]Ibid.

[22]U.S. News and World Report, July 25, 1977, p. 75.

[23]Ibid.

[24]Newsweek, October 21, 1974, p. 91.

[25]Vermont Royster, "The New Illiteracy," Change, April, 1977, p. 7.

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